

It's not just space; Experts are employing architecture, psychology and neuroscience to spread the gospel about the high price we pay for poor work environments

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In an ideal world, Jacqueline Vischer would change a few things about her office at the Université de Montréal. The old linoleum floors could do with wall-to-wall carpeting. The overhead fluorescent tube lighting is a bit dreary. And then there's the noisy truck loading dock nearby. But given the positives - the office is roomy and has large windows that open - Vischer considers herself lucky. "I can't believe the often abysmal places people put up with working in," she said during a recent interview. Despite evidence the physical workplace has a direct impact on morale, productivity and health, too many offices are poorly designed, Vischer believes. She's part of a growing group of experts who meld architecture, psychology and even neuroscience, and who are spreading the gospel about the high price we pay for poor work environments.

A professor in the interior design program at the Université de Montréal, Vischer is also the founder of Groupe de recherche sur les environnements de travail (GRET), a research group at the school. Funded by corporate contributions and consulting contracts, GRET studies work environments and advises clients how to improve office spaces and, along the way, nurture their company's culture. The GRET team looks at how to maximize employee comfort by adjusting variables like light, noise, temperature, colours, ventilation, glare, furniture and workstations, privacy and meeting areas. They've also come up with a questionnaire for employees to rate their workplaces and a database that lets employers see where they stand against others in their industry. "If a workplace is uncomfortable, more energy is expended to do the same work," Vischer told an audience recently at SIDIM, a Montreal interior design show. But isn't that self-evident? Why has it taken us so long to realize the demoralizing effect of burying people behind lifeless cubicles? Part of the problem stems from conflicting priorities of the architectural profession, according to Vischer. "The pressure on them professionally is to produce things that get into magazines," she said. And architects are under pressure to spend time mastering new technologies, like computer-assisted design, she added. A silo effect is also at work, Vischer said. Lighting experts, engineers, ergonomists, architects, interior designers, employers and real-estate developers often don't work together, so the needs of building occupants become an afterthought. Sholem Prasow chalks up poor office design to short-term thinking. Prasow is a vice-president with Teknion Corp., a Toronto-based maker of office systems and furniture.

"Until now, the client has defined a productive workplace as the lowest possible initial cost they can get away with, plus a few 'soft' additions," said Prasow, who also spoke at the SIDIM. "We need a mindset change. You have to think of costs over the long haul," he said. "The focus has to be on the occupant and why they're there." But there are

glimmers of hope for workers, Vischer said. Demographics are driving change. "The labour pool is shrinking, so the focus is not just on hiring but also on retaining," she said. "The workplace is suddenly an asset." Demographics are at work in other ways: With tech companies as their models, the younger generation puts more emphasis on teamwork and a flatter hierarchy, and less emphasis on private space as status. That means shared areas - like coffee and eating rooms and meeting places - are important to this crowd. Montreal interior designer Elaine Fenton, who sits on GRET's advisory committee, says rising real-estate prices are also forcing new thinking. "With increased density (more workers in less space), other issues have come in," she said. But many clients are afraid of asking workers what they want, fearing they won't be able to meet expectations, Fenton said. Consultation can solve that. "If employees are brought into the process and kept abreast of decisions and why priorities are chosen, they can deal with it," she said. And GRET's employee questionnaire about workplace functionality removes subjectivity from the process, she added. "It's not just a wish list," Fenton said, referring to designing effective workplaces. Aside from fear of raising expectations, Vischer often runs up against preconceptions about what kind of office ensures comfort and productivity. "A lot of people have very fixed ideas of what a good space is," she said. Desjardins Financial Security faced down those preconceptions when it overhauled its offices in Montreal, Quebec City and Lévis. To deal with rapid growth, the insurance and financial services company did away with different size offices, giving all employees 49 square feet. Very few of these are closed offices. But at the same time, the company upgraded its furniture. Desjardins hired GRET to evaluate the changes. Getting input from employees on the redesign eased the transition, said Denis Chouinard, Desjardins' senior adviser for office design and planning. "They weren't negative when they saw it would be a highly functional space," he said of the new workstations. From its work with Desjardins and others, Vischer's team has pinpointed concerns that keep bubbling to the surface. Natural light is often at the top of the list. So are a nice view, quality furniture, comfortable computer layout, good technology and not too much noise. (Of course, sometimes there are trade-offs. More windows and glass interior partitions instead of solid ones generate more noise, for example.) In some countries there are regulations dealing with certain office features, like access to natural light. Not so in Canada. "I think North America is miles behind on that thinking," Vischer said. While there's catching up to do, some experts are already opening the next frontier: making links between architecture and neuroscience. In the U.S., the Academy of Neuroscience for Architecture is looking into the biological human response to the built environment. "There are a lot of questions about why and how people respond to places where they work, but not a lot of research results on that yet," said academy founding president John Eberhard. In the meantime, Vischer is pushing her message about how to keep employees happy. "Companies make the mistake of thinking it's just space," she said.